



## ZEF research in brief

# NGOs: Development actors as agents for alternatives to development?

Exploring the case of Haiti

by Julia Schöneberg

Haiti, the “Pearl of the Caribbean”. A proud country with the only successful slave revolution in history, the first independent “black” republic. However, usually these are not the attributes that come first to mind. Quite in contrast, Haiti is the poorest country of the Western hemisphere, known as the “Republic of NGOs”, with the second highest number of foreign NGOs in the world. Yet, the results of this involvement have been disturbingly minute. Top-down interventions have led to the disempowerment of Haitian actors rather than producing sustainable change. After decades of international development work, conditions have not improved substantially.

### Goals and set-up of the study

This research explores partnerships of international NGOs (INGOs) and Haitian organisations (HNGOs). Despite many failings in the past, partnership continues to be considered as the only right and potentially productive form of engaging in North-South NGO interaction.

The research aims to:

- (1) analyze conditions and limitations of partnership
- (2) to identify possible alternative spaces where INGOs help to produce change, but do not co-opt or overwhelm Haitian visions.

Insights can contribute to reshaping interactions in order to reach a better level of sustainability. Field research was carried out in the Haitian capital and in four departments in 2012, 2013 and 2014. Data was collected through participant observation, narrative interviews and group discussions with INGO and HNGO staff, activists, community leaders and grassroots groups.

### Findings

Findings suggest that although INGO's claims stress the importance of equality, participation and dialogue, respondents are aware that these conditions are rather an ideal than a fact. INGOs view themselves as intermediaries in the larger aid system, which determines the nature of relationships and has a trickle-down effect. INGOs find themselves in positions, where, in order to demonstrate impact and results to their own donors they feel the need to dominate processes of decision-making and implementation. Although this compromises sustainability by weakening Haitian actors, INGOs feel as not having sufficient space to challenge these structures.

Empirical data also provides evidence that even a conscious confrontation of the aid system does not provide alternatives as long as interactions are conducted within realms of project work.



Within these, relationships inevitably remain focused on the question of financial funds. Even worse, the continuation of funding after local groups have reached a certain level of structuration is often redundant. The findings suggest that the inherent pitfall in current interactions is the emphasis on projects rather than movements. The “focus [is] on technical financial assistance [...], not on structural conditions that shape the everyday lives of people” (Petras 1999). There seems to be a need for a repoliticization of development.



A house in Haiti.

Therefore, we explored potentially alternative models of engagement. One example evaluates an INGO that views its role as supporting groups to fulfill their rights rather than to facilitate development. Instead of engaging in traditional project work they cooperate with locally existent structures of self-help and solidarity. The INGO positions itself politically by supporting a movement against the exploitation of natural resources, yet is cautious not to play

an active role. They seek to provide networks and establish connections to lawyers, journalists and activists in other countries. In this context the goal of engagement is to fund social change to increase the power of those who are most disadvantaged (politically, socially, economically) (Klugman 2010).

### Conclusion

Although INGOs may have some spaces to engage in alternatives to development, these remain restricted within the established structures of project interaction. Indeed, there seems to be evidence that the reframing of interaction within political terms of global interdependence, solidarity and rights in connection with independent funding allows for more sustainable processes of change. Thinking within terms of social change and global networking can provide the much needed tool for unravelling the “complex relationship between [...] the discourse of partnership and bottom-up, and the reality of donor power and global hegemonic discourse on development” (Tvedt 2004).

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